

## WHAT JESUS TAUGHT ABOUT RELATIONSHIPS 1: LOVE

(Taken and adapted from 'The Red Bits – A Study Guide' by Michael Button)

**Introduction.** From time to time certain individuals have felt the need to shut themselves off from society and live a life of solitary prayer and contemplation. However this is not the intention Jesus has for the vast majority of His followers. Jesus called together His own community of the *Church*, in which believers might enjoy a special relationship with one another through their mutual relationship with Him, but He does not expect that community to exist in isolation from the society in which they live. Jesus Himself mixed freely with all people – accepting invitations to a wedding party, the homes of tax-collectors (ostracised by their contemporaries) as well as the pious Pharisees.<sup>1</sup> Christians are to affect their society for good, as salt affects the food with which it is in contact, both as a preservative and for seasoning (*read* Matt 5:13). They can only do this by being part of that society. Christians preserve God's standards in an increasingly degenerate society and season worldly indifference with Christian love.

Love is indeed to be the hallmark of those who follow Christ. In this Study we shall see what Jesus taught about love and then look at other aspects of how Christians are to act in relation to others, whether they are fellow believers or unbelievers.

**Definition.** The Greek language, in which the New Testament was written, uses different words to identify four different types of love. In English we have only the one word, so much of the intended meaning can be lost in translation. Two of the Greek words are used in the New Testament in their various forms: *philos* (meaning 'love from natural affection'), used 51 times, and *agapé*, used 334 times. Since *agapé* is the predominate word used by New Testament writers, including their recordings of Jesus' references to love, we shall give careful attention to understanding its meaning.

*Agapé* seems to have been little used in secular Greek but it was used by the writers of the Septuagint (the translation of the Hebrew Old Testament into Greek around 300-200 BC) for loving God, loving one's neighbour and loving the stranger.<sup>2</sup>

*Agapé* is a selfless love. It is based less on feelings and more on the will. It is independent of any love or action by the one loved. Only this makes it possible for us to love our enemies, as Jesus commanded, for such love seeks their good without necessarily 'liking' them or receiving any favours from them. Agape love can only be truly expressed in action, through practical concern and care, as the Apostle John wrote in the first of his three letters (*read* 1 John 3:16-18). The

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<sup>1</sup> John 2:2; Matt 9:10 & Matt 11:19; Luke 14:1.

<sup>2</sup> Deut 6 5 & 11:1; Lev19:18; Lev19:34.

translators of the Authorised (King James) Bible in 1611 used the word 'charity' in most references to *agapé*, emphasising its practical nature of doing good to others.

God's love is of the *agapé* variety. He loved us without our first showing any love to Him and He expressed that love in the action of giving His only Son for our sakes (*read 1 John 4:19 followed by John 3:16*).

**Activity 1:** Which of the following are demonstrating *agapé* love?

- (a) Margaret feels love for the suffering children.
- (b) Peter fell in love with Jane.
- (c) David helps serve food to the homeless.
- (d) Jennifer regularly visits a lonely widow.
- (e) Maurice is ridiculed by his work colleague, John, but he goes out of his way to help John through a difficult situation.
- (f) Marvin turns a blind eye to his neighbour's crime, to avoid conflict.
- (g) Jesus allowed His enemies to crucify Him so that we could have eternal life.

With this definition of *agapé* in mind, we shall now turn to the actual teaching of Jesus on the subject. In all cases the word used for love will be *agapé*, unless otherwise stated.

**1. The love of God.** One word for love seems to be inadequate to express the love of God. Both the words *agapé* and *phileo* are used when Jesus speaks of His Father's love for Him and for those who love, trust and obey Him.

Read the following verses, noting the word used in each:

|                                      |               |               |
|--------------------------------------|---------------|---------------|
| The Fathers love for:                | <i>agapé</i>  | <i>phileo</i> |
| The Son                              | John 10:17    | John 5:20     |
| Those who love, trust and obey Jesus | John 14:21-23 | John 16:27    |

No doubt both words are used of God's love because *phileo* is the affectionate love of a father to his children, and *agapé* is the practical love shown by the Father to Jesus and to us.

Jesus loves His disciples with the *agapé* love He had received from His Father to the extent that He lays down His life for His friends: "*As the Father loved Me, I also have loved you ... Greater love has no one than this, than to lay down one's life for his friends.*"<sup>3</sup>

**2. Love for God and for Jesus.** Love for God was commanded in the Old Testament. Though it was not on the list of the Ten Commandments in Exodus Chapter 20, which are universally considered to apply to all people for all time, Jesus referred to love for God as the greatest of God's commandments.

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<sup>3</sup> John 15:9-13.

**Activity 2:** Read the Greatest Commandment in Deut 6:4-5, then Jesus' references to it in Mark 12:30 and Luke 10:27.

(a) Which word does Jesus add to the Old Testament passage?

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(b) Which mention four aspects, and what are they?

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By comparing the Hebrew and Greek versions of the Old Testament it would seem that, in the process of translating, it was necessary to expand the three words into four in order to give the fullest expression of the original meaning. By using the four words *heart, soul, mind and strength*, Jesus is saying that we are to love God with the whole of our personality – wholeheartedly in will, with all the desire of the soul, with undivided mind and giving all our strength in action.

To love God we must love His Son.<sup>4</sup> Jesus said regarding this:

- (i) We show our love to Him by keeping His commandments (*read* John 14:21 & 23).
- (ii) Wholehearted love is a prerequisite for serving Jesus (*read* John 21:15-17). Bible scholars are unsure whether Jesus' words to Peter *More than **these*** referred to Peter's fishing boat and nets or comparison between Peter's love and that of his fellow disciples. In practice, it could be both. Peter had gone back to his old occupation of fishing, which he must leave entirely if he was to serve Jesus as leader of the dynamic expanding Church, but it was also a challenge to Peter's statement, *Even if all are made to stumble because of you, I will never be made to stumble*,<sup>5</sup> which he had already failed to maintain.<sup>6</sup>

Service out of love is a better motive and more satisfying than service out of duty.

- (iii) Love for Jesus must take precedence over family love (*read* Matt 10:37). This was said in the context of opposition from family members. It means not letting natural ties keep us from following Jesus. It does not imply neglect of the family.

**3. Love sums up the Law.** Jesus was able to speak of love as the basis of all that was taught in the Law of Moses and the Prophets (*read* Matt 22:40).

**4. Love as a command.** Having received the love of His Father, Jesus showed love to His disciples and commands His disciples not only to keep themselves in His love but in turn to love one another (*read* John 15:9-12). The Apostle John wrote about this in his letters, showing that our ability to love springs from the love we have received from God (*read* 1 John 4:19-21).

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<sup>4</sup> John 8:42.

<sup>5</sup> Matt 26:33.

<sup>6</sup> Mark 14:66-72.

Jesus told us and showed us the way to do this:

- (i) Love one another, as Jesus has loved us (*read* John 13:34-35).
- (ii) Love with no self-interest. As we have seen,<sup>7</sup> this is a basic characteristic of *agapé*. Two practical examples are given by Jesus – in lending and in giving hospitality (*read* Luke 6:34-35 and Luke 14:12-14). Every act of unselfish love will receive its reward (*read* Matt 10:42).
- (iii) Love must always be mindful of the well-being of others. This includes ensuring that others are not caused to stumble by our words or behaviour (*read* Mark 9:42). It does not mean overlooking their faults, rather we should be loving enough to correct them if necessary (for their own good, not for our personal gratification), seeking to do so in the least public way as possible so as not to expose their faults until this becomes necessary (*read* Matt 18:15-16).
- (iv) Love must not be confined just to those who love us. It must be extended to our neighbours and even to our enemies (*read* Luke 6:32-35). Indeed, Jesus said this is second only to loving God (*read* Matt 22:37-39). Jesus illustrated such love in the Parable of the Good Samaritan.<sup>8</sup>

Some Christians have struggled with the requirement to love their enemies. If our enemies are doing or likely to be doing harm to us, or to others we love, our natural tendency might be to show our hatred of what they are doing by refusing to show any love towards them. This should not be the Christian way. However, to show love to the sinner is not to condone the sin. God showed love to us sinners, but He did not ignore our sin, rather He went to great lengths to deliver us from our sin. Love in such circumstances is sometimes referred to as *conquering love*, since love can win through to the heart where hatred and indifference have no effect.

- (v) Love should not stop at doing one's duty but should give beyond what a person might ask or expect (*read* Matt 5:39-41).
- (vi) Do to others what you would like them to do to you (Matt 7:12). This has been called *The Golden Rule*. It is a useful 'rule of thumb' method of deciding what is the loving thing to do in the current situation.

**5. Summary on Love.** All that the Old Testament teaches through the Laws of Moses and Prophets can be summed up in the two commandments *Love God* and *Love your neighbour*. Jesus said, "*On these two commandments hang all the Law and the Prophets.*"<sup>9</sup>

Jesus showed the Father's love to us, and expects us to show similar love to others. Leon Morris writes: "Jesus brought into the world a new emphasis on love

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<sup>7</sup> In Definition above.

<sup>8</sup> Luke 10:30-37.

<sup>9</sup> Matt 22:40.

which he demonstrated in his own life and which he made clear he expected his disciples to produce too."<sup>10</sup>

Activity 3: To think about:

- (a) In what way did Jesus show us love?
- (b) How can love sum up all other commandments?

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<sup>10</sup> Leon Morris, *Dictionary of the Gospels*<sup>b</sup>.